

# Time to change impressions

Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC) President **Leigh Harry** says an improving economy is no time for apathy.



JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

With some improvement evident in the global economy, the meetings industry is again demonstrating its resiliency and adaptability. But it may actually be the most dangerous of times for industry advocacy.

There is a natural tendency to respond to the first bits of positive news with a sigh of relief and a turning of attention to the business at hand while abandoning the serious efforts needed to enhance industry profile and appreciation. That would be a mistake.

The fact that meetings and conventions came into disrepute so quickly in the face of recession in many parts of the world clearly demonstrated that we have an image problem. It is one that could easily recur.

The kinds of pressures meetings and conventions came under during the recession are still playing out on a number of fronts. Many governments, most notably those in the US and the UK, have announced major cuts in their meeting activities and accompanying restrictions in business travel. At the same time, there are ongoing calls for reduction in meeting activities in the name of sustainability.

Let us not forget also the growing role of alternatives driven by improvements in communications technology. The use of web-based activities such as webinars and other forms of remote meetings have gained traction, and while they may have actually helped enhance many meetings, they may in time become more in the way of competitors.

Taken together, these factors can have a dangerous synergy. Governments and corporations looking for cost savings can reduce meetings-related travel in the name of sustainability – and the technology to help them do so is improving every day. In the absence of strong arguments about the value of meetings, there is little to stop such a trend.



Many groups still see us as a diversion or a form of entertainment rather than a key element in economic recovery. We have a long way to go in changing that impression.

A time of recovery is the best possible time to tell our story. When we can point to business growth and expansion instead of declines we are much better able to show why our sector has value – and why it at the same time generates value for other parts of the economy. However, this is precisely the time when we are least likely to devote time to communications, simply because it feels like the pressure has subsided.

Fortunately, there are efforts under way by industry organisations which will help keep the momentum going – things like the Face Time campaign mounted by industry players in the US. There are also new research and evaluation programmes underway in an effort to provide a unified approach to measuring both the economic and outcome values of the industry. These were a result of the concerns we all felt when prospects were at their worst, and will hopefully carry on into the future.

But like all communications activities, the best results are achieved on a local basis where what we as an industry accomplish is felt most directly. Measures of jobs,

spending, social benefits and professional advancement are at their strongest when people see that they are being delivered right in their own backyards, and that is why we all have a role to play in the overall communications effort.

JMIC is developing materials, messages and strategies that can be applied at the local level. It is also working to pull together industry-wide research in a form that is more directly usable by anyone who has an argument to make with their own communities and governments. And it is working to encourage a greater exchange among the interests that make up our very diverse industry.

Unless we make this kind of effort, we won't be any better prepared to address industry criticism than we were the last time. And given the realities of economic cycles, there will indeed be a next time!

## JMIC members include:

**AIPC** (the International Association of Congress Centres);  
**COCAL** (the Latin American Confederation of PCO and Related Companies);  
**DMAI** (Destination Marketing Association International);  
**ECM** (European Cities Marketing);  
**EFAPCO** (the European Federation of Associations of Professional Congress Organisers);  
**EVVC** (the European Association of Event Centres);  
**IAPCO** (the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers);  
**ICCA** (the International Congress and Convention Association);  
**MPI** (Meeting Professionals International);  
**PCMA** (the Professional Convention Association Management Association);  
**SITE** (the Society of Incentive & Travel Executives) and  
**UFI** (the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry).